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The Present Relations of Science to Religion.

A SERMON

PREACHED ON

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BY THE

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A Sermon, &c.

ECCLESIASTES i. 17.

“I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly :
I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.”

THE writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes tells us that he made it his business to enquire into all that went on upon the earth in the hope that he might find “what was that good for the sons of men which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life.” His enquiry led him in every instance to the same conclusion, that all was vanity. The word ‘vanity’ here, however, plainly does not mean an absolute, but only a relative, condemnation. The Preacher does not mean to say that human pursuits contain absolutely nothing in them that is good, nor does he wish to exhort his hearers to quit altogether what he has condemned. On the contrary, the book abounds with the fullest acknowledgments of the excellence of each human occupation and enjoyment in its turn. There is much in the praise of pleasure; “There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour.” There is much in praise of labour; “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.” There is much in praise of wisdom; “Wisdom is better than strength;” “Wisdom is as good as an inheritance;” “Wisdom is profitable to direct.” There is much in praise of up-

right conduct; "God giveth to a man that is good in His sight wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner He giveth travail." There is much in praise of the happy heart of youth; "Let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart and in the sight of thine eyes." And all these praises, and the exhortations that go along with them to enjoy the good that God hath given, are not ironical, but seriously meant. But, notwithstanding, one after another, all human pursuits, all human gifts, all human enjoyments, are branded with the same mark of deficiency; all, even the most excellent, are still vanity and vexation of spirit. Not wisdom only, and labour, and youth, and pleasure, but even the upright walk and the keeping of the ordinances of religion, even they too are in the same sense vanity. "There is one event to the righteous and to the wicked, to the clean and to the unclean, to him that sacrificeth and to him that sacrificeth not; as is the good so is the sinner, and he that sweareth as he that feareth an oath."

It is plain that the sense in which all these things are vanity is, that they cannot satisfy. They are all, without exception, shadows and not substance. They all, without exception, promise what they cannot perform. Each in its turn promises to fill the whole man and give him all that he wants. There are excellent enjoyments which, some for a shorter, some for a longer time, seem to be all that the soul desires. There are occupations and labours which aim at so worthy an end, and are rewarded by so noble an appreciation, that for a time the soul believes them equal to all its needs. The fire of youthful happiness burns so brightly, and so warmly, and so purely, that we are

tempted to declare it the one best gift of God. There is a path of life so honoured by men, so approved by conscience, namely, the path of duty, that in it, surely, might well seem to be comprised all that man can possibly require. And yet each one of these will be found wanting; good as far as it goes, but not the whole; promising to satisfy, and never fulfilling its promise; in fact, only then fulfilling its function when it proclaims its own vanity, and bids the seeker seek further still. The very excellence of the most excellent of all these will the more emphatically condemn it, for that excellence is the false light which allures men to believe in its perfection, and to fancy that all that is wanted shall here be found.

So we are led to the conclusion of the whole matter. "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man." Not in pleasure however pure and however heavenly, not in wisdom however searching, not in labour however successful, not in worldly duty however self-denying, but in God shall we find the true substance of all that is done under the sun, the reality of which all else is the image, the brightness of which all else is the reflection.

This conclusion has been in the minds of the vast majority of thinkers ever since. It is possible to forget God altogether in the whirl of pleasure, in the absorbing interests of business or of ambition. But the student cannot well forget the question which underlies all other questions, 'What is it that gives any unity or consistency to all these studies? What is the relation between our knowledge and the source of all knowledge? What can human science tell me of divine nature?' And those who have been more than students, who have been Christians in heart as

well as searchers after truth, have sought for an answer to this question, not as the solution of an intellectual puzzle, but as the true end of all their studies. The desire to find God in all His works is certainly not rare, the desire to clear up the relation between faith and science is almost universal in those who devote themselves to scientific investigation. Hence no sooner is any physical theory or hypothesis proposed which in the remotest way can affect the belief of Christians, than its bearings on every article of the Christian faith, and even on every detail of the commonly received religious opinions, are discussed at the fullest length, and not unfrequently with an eager anxiety to identify faith and science which overshoots the mark, by attempting to decide before there is evidence enough for a decision.

On the present occasion it seems to be not unfitting to examine some of the leading relations between religion and science, especially with a view to point out some of the changes which the progress of science is producing in them.

Science has been called the handmaid of theology, and theology has often had recourse to science for arguments to prove or confirm her fundamental propositions. But it is remarkable that theology has almost always for this purpose dwelt chiefly not on the scientific, but on the unscientific statements of science. Arguments have been commonly extracted not from the revelations of science, but from her confessions; and theology has begun where science has ended. It has been common to trace the power of God not in that which is universal, but in that which is individual: not in the laws of nature, but in any apparent interference with those laws; not in the

maintenance, but in the creation of the universe. And sometimes such stress has been laid upon these arguments, that to deny them was held to be a denial of their conclusions; and men were thought impious who attempted to represent the present order of the solar system or the existence of animal life as the work of natural causes, and not the direct handiwork of God Himself. And yet spontaneous generation was long believed in by the most religious men, and there seems no more reason why the solar system should not have been brought into its present form by the slow working of natural causes than the surface of the earth, about whose gradual formation most students are now agreed. The fact is, that one idea is now emerging into supremacy in science, a supremacy which it never possessed before, and for which it still has to fight a battle; and that is the idea of law. Different orders of natural phenomena have in time past been held to be exempt from that idea, either tacitly or avowedly. The weather, the thunder and lightning, the crops of the earth, the progress of disease, whether over a country or in an individual, these have been considered as regulated by some special interference, even when it was already known that the recurrence of the seasons, the motions of the planets, the periodic winds, and other phenomena of the same kind were subject to invariable laws. But the steady march of science has now reached the point when men are tempted, or rather compelled, to jump at once to a universal conclusion; all analogy points one way and none another. And the student of science is learning to look upon fixed laws as universal, and many of the old arguments which science once supplied to religion are in consequence rapidly disappear-

ing. How strikingly altered is our view from that of a few centuries ago is shewn by the fact that the miracles recorded in the Bible, which once were looked on as the bulwarks of the faith, are now felt by very many to be difficulties in their way; and commentators endeavour to represent them not as mere interferences with the laws of nature, but as the natural action of still higher laws belonging to a world whose phenomena are only half revealed to us.

It is evident that this change in science necessitates a change in its relation to faith. If law be either almost or altogether universal, we must look for the finger of God in that law: we must expect to find Him manifesting His love, His wisdom, His infinity, not in individual acts of will, but in a perfection of legislation rendering all individual action needless; we must find His providence in that perfect adaptation of all the parts of the machine to one another which shall have the effect of tender care, though it proceed by an invariable action. The vast consequences which flow from a few simple properties of matter, the profusion of combinations, the beauty, the order, the happiness which abound in the creation in consequence of these, such must be now the teachers of the man of science to make him feel that God is with him in all his studies.

It may be, indeed, that the scientific student is every day less and less driven to confession of the narrowness of his knowledge; he has less occasion for the humility which once allowed vast realms of nature to lie out of the domain of science, and was wont to say, when baffled, 'Here human powers can go no further, this knowledge God has reserved for Himself.' On the contrary, he is now inclined to think that if

only time enough be given, there seems to be no kind of phenomenon under the sun which patient study will not bring within the range of science. But this only amounts to saying that he must learn humility in another way. God will not stop human science in order to teach man humility. He will not have man ignorant in order to be humble. He will have him study and learn, and be humble notwithstanding. And already we can see that as the bar is removed which once seemed to stop man's progress in knowledge, so all the clearer is the bar made manifest which limits his powers of action. You have studied the laws of God's creation; can you alter one of them in the very slightest degree? You have weighed the matter of the earth; can you create or can you (as would have been thought not long ago) annihilate one grain of its dust? The creation of matter and the creation of the laws of matter is absolutely beyond all your power and all your wisdom; and the longer you study and the wider appears to your eye the possible range of your science, the more clear and certain is this conclusion. There we find the hand of God; there we shall never find the hand of man.

The natural objection to find God in laws rather than in acts is that it tends to a kind of pantheism which robs us of our belief in God's personality. There is not perhaps much, though there is some, tendency to that gross material pantheism which identifies the universe with God, and making all created matter to be as it were His body, destroys our conception of His nature. But there is a considerable tendency to the subtler pantheism, which forgets Him in the idea of a universal law or system of laws, with a rigid mechanical action; without tenderness, without consciousness, without any answer to affection. It is

clear, however, that this tendency to pantheism is not in the conception of law, but in our own minds; and the proper corrective is to lift our minds up to the level which science demands of us. For we form our idea of God, and indeed we must do so, by analogy from ourselves. In the infancy of knowledge the spiritual faculty in man appears to be his will. The ideal of manhood is that of a will working at every moment by pure and high instincts, by the instincts of love, and tenderness, and unselfish generosity, and noble self-respect. But as knowledge grows, even in the short course of our own life, the reason and not the will, the principles and not the instincts, become the supreme characteristic of man, and that which most distinguishes him from all lower creatures. Then the ideal of manhood is that of a will subordinate to an enlightened reason or conscience, acting by laws the ground of which is understood, with a forethought of consequences, with a deliberateness of purpose, not swayed hither and thither by even the highest impulses, but joining to the tenderest feelings the power of harmonizing them with a consistent unvarying rule of action. So, too, we may think of God as love, but as love already acquainted with all that will happen or that can happen, and therefore able to harmonize that love with a fixed system of laws, and not driven, as human love is often driven, to shift its course by the occurrence or the discovery of circumstances previously unknown. We can think of His tenderness as shewn, not in stopping the machinery of the world to adapt our circumstances to our short-sighted wishes, but in supplying our souls with a spiritual power which will enable us to rise above all circumstances whatever.

This, however, is not all that we get from the idea of law. The laws of conscience, quite as much as the

laws of nature, are capable of being represented to our minds in their highest form as absolutely fixed. Not only are they capable of being so represented, but it is the shape which they naturally wear. We naturally think, as soon as we conceive the idea of law at all, of the laws of morals as being in their supreme manifestation eternal and immutable. And while science demands our recognition of the universal dominion of physical laws, and treats all exceptions as so rare that we may safely disregard them in our estimate, so conscience perpetually proclaims the existence and loftier dominion of her moral law, and requires us to believe, under pain of her displeasure, and as we value the dignity of our own manhood, that all laws are subordinate to hers, and that whatever appearances there may be to the contrary, holiness and goodness and justice are the final arbiters of all that is, or hath been, or shall be, in the universe. Thus above and beyond all the physical laws that we know, rises another of a different kind, proclaiming a different authority, demanding a completer obedience. Long induction compels our unhesitating belief in the properties of matter, or, in other words, in the laws of nature. No one doubts that fire will burn, that ice will chill, that poison will destroy; and the proof of the faith is given by the obedience rendered. Precisely the same unhesitating faith will conscience require for the moral law; we are to believe with the same unhesitating certainty that justice and goodness and holiness rule the universe, and we are to act on that belief.

And further, this moral law is not capable, like the physical law, of being conceived as impersonal, but carries in it the conviction of its own personality. For a moral law differs from a physical law in this, that

a physical law is satisfied by mere verification : it is enough for a physical law if the facts invariably accord with the predictions of the law. Not so with a moral law. It is not justice if by some mere external accident it so happens that I get my deserts ; a murderer is not really punished for a murder because he is accidentally hung by those who know nothing of his crime ; a servant would not consider himself to have received his wages because he found an equal amount by a lucky accident. The intention is essential to the morality ; it would not satisfy the demands of justice that by some accident it should turn out that justice was always done ; it must not only be done, it must be intended. And if there is intention, there is will ; and if there is will, there is personality. And thus the moral law, whose sovereign authority is incessantly proclaimed within us, becomes the embodiment of the God of holiness, and in obeying it we are worshipping Him.

It is true that we rise to the belief in the universal dominion of the moral law by an act of faith, and not by demonstration ; but the moral spring is not greater in this case than the intellectual spring in the other. No man can say that it is yet demonstrated in detail that all nature is subject to fixed laws ; in fact, many who are not themselves students of science, and are therefore only bound to accept the conclusions of science so far as they are demonstrated, will still maintain that the health of the body and the changes of the weather are under some special government, and not under absolutely fixed laws at all. Yet such is the power of the perpetually operating analogy of science, that no student of nature seriously doubts the universality, or, at any rate, the generality, of the principle. Exceptions may still be possible, for our

ignorance is, after all, greater than our knowledge, but assuredly they are so extremely rare that they need not be counted. And why do we thus leap to this conclusion? Because without it all science becomes incomplete and unaccountable; because we have tried it over and over again, and it has never yet failed us; because it perpetually opens new paths of knowledge, and no other principle ever has. Now for precisely the same reasons do we leap to the parallel conclusion in religion. We have not evidence enough to shew that the moral law rules the world; there is, indeed, much that obeys it, but there is also much that seems to disobey it; but never for a moment does conscience relax her demand upon our assent: for without it all our morality becomes incomplete and unaccountable; the belief in it has always promised to raise us in the scale of moral being, and, whenever we have tried it, it has never failed to do so; it perpetually lifts us above ourselves to all we find noblest, and purest, and best, and no other principle ever did or will.

Thus while the fixed laws of science can supply natural religion with numberless illustrations of the wisdom, the beneficence, the order, the beauty that characterize the workmanship of God; while they illustrate His infinity by the marvellous complexity of natural combinations, by the variety and order of His creatures, by the exquisite finish alike bestowed on the very greatest and on the very least of His works, as if size were absolutely nothing in His sight; so, too, they supply the analogy by which we can rise above themselves to that still higher law in which we find the very presence of the person of the Godhead.

Similar to this relation between science and natural religion is the relation between science and revelation.

There was a time when the spheres of these two were distinct; or, if there were ever an appearance of collision, science was required to give place. That time ceased with Galileo, and can never return. The student of science now feels himself bound by the interests of truth, and can admit no other obligation. And if he be a religious man, he believes that both books, the book of Nature and the book of Revelation, come alike from God, and that he has no more right to refuse to accept what he finds in the one than what he finds in the other. The two books are indeed on totally different subjects; the one may be called a treatise on physics and mathematics, the other a treatise on theology and morals. But they are both by the same Author; and the difference in their importance is derived from the difference in their matter, and not from any difference in their authority. Whenever, therefore, there is a collision between them, the dispute becomes simply a question of evidence. Here, you have in nature God's handiwork; there, you have in the Bible the message which He commissioned certain servants of His to give you. They do not appear to agree. Now, on the one side, are you quite certain in your interpretation of His handiwork? on the other, are you quite certain that you are not mixing up with His message some extraneous matter which belongs not to the message, but to the messenger? In the case of Galileo the question has been answered; the astronomer was right, the theologians were wrong. The apparent statement that the sun went round the earth is now acknowledged to belong to the messenger, not to the message; to the language, not to the substance. The present state of science indicates that there will be more answers in the same

direction. Geology, for instance, has already altered our conception of a great part of the Book of Genesis. Researches into ancient records seem likely to affect the details of the history of the early races of mankind. How each one of the many questions thus started will be ultimately answered it is impossible to say. The probability is that both the agreements and the discrepancies between science and the Biblical narrative will be very different from what we now suppose: but, at any rate, it is tolerably plain that the Bible is not to look to science for that confirmation of minute details which not very long ago was confidently expected, and in many cases apparently produced.

Is there, then, no harmony between the Bible and science? Are they, if not foes, yet so distinct as to have no point of meeting? Not so. But this harmony is to be looked for in a different direction; not in petty details of fact are we to find it, but in the deep identity of tone, character, and spirit which pervade both the books. Where, for instance, in all literature is the wonderful patience of God's operations more clearly exhibited than in the Bible? Again and again are we, as it were, reminded that to Him a thousand years are as one day, and one day as a thousand years. To Him, an absolutely infinite Being, what difference can there be between long and short? why should He not spend ages as willingly as seconds? So He chooses out a people two thousand years before it is wanted, and drills it and disciplines it from the call of Abraham to the coming of our Lord; all, as it seems, to make a fit scene for that four years of our Lord's ministry, and a fit instrument for conveying His message to

the world. Is not this like the same Hand that lavishes in unmeasured profusion thousands of years to make a continent, to stock it with mountains and rivers, with mines and stone-quarries, all, as it seems, to be a scene for the history of one of our passing nations? Or again, look at the enormous waste that seems to meet us in the very conception of choosing a people at all. The Jews were God's chosen, but what were all the rest? Some few races, we can see, were trained up for similar, though inferior, purposes; but how vast a number seem no more than a mere store of material useless for the present. And is there not a similar waste in the creation of nature, stores of fossils buried where they can be of no value, plants growing where none can enjoy them, seeds and eggs by millions that never come to life at all? Or again, look at the marvellous adaptation to human feeling which marks every precept of the Bible, and compare it with the wonderful beauty and beneficence of nature. Or again, look at the awful sternness with which the Bible threatens all disobedience, and compare it with the merciless severity of the physical laws when they are disobeyed. Or again, look at the mystery of repentance, the restoration to favour so often accompanied by no remission of the penalty, and see if nature does not often repair a fault in such a way as to leave the punishment for life. Or again, look at the strange instances of curses turned to blessings, and men apparently raised in some sense to a higher state by having fallen, and compare it with those strange caprices, as we call them, by which nature sometimes changes mischief into downright improvement. Whatever may be the case as regards the details of the narra-

tive, assuredly there can be no mistake regarding the spirit of the author. The more the Bible is studied, and the more nature is studied, the deeper will be found the harmony between them in character, the more assured the certainty that whoever inspired the one also made the other. And most assured will that certainty be in the mind of him who studies the Bible as it was meant to be studied, not as an interesting historical record, but as the guide of life, the revelation of spiritual truth, the awakener and the kindler of religious inspiration.

But when we have reached this point, when we have made science help us into religion, have we indeed reached, according to the Preacher, the conclusion of the whole matter? No, indeed. Religious speculations, though the highest of all speculations, are yet but speculations; and if we rest in them we shall certainly be compelled to pronounce them also vanity and vexation of spirit. When we fight the battle with besetting sins; when we have to resist some terrible attack from sensuality, from ambition, from vanity, from pride; in the great crises of our life, when we stand where several ways meet, and our better nature is at war with our lower, and we seem to say, What shall I do to inherit eternal life? and a still small voice seems to answer, Sell what thou hast and give unto the poor, and come, follow Me; on the bed of sickness and of death, when this world seems to fade out of sight; in the day of sharp trouble, of anxiety, of wounded affection, of hopeless misery,—then we need something more than religious speculations even of the loftiest kind; then we are not contented to hear of the moral law or of the nature of God; we want God Himself, and without the living God we feel that we cannot stand. Then it is that the student of science knows that the

most unlettered peasant can penetrate to the true reality of all things as surely as the wisest philosopher; then science is called vanity, and theology is forgotten; then pain is God's scourge to chastise, and His judgments are warnings, and the cry of our hearts is the echo of the groanings of His spirit, and the Bible is a letter written in His own hand, and we are His children, and He is our Father. Then all else fails us, and we cannot be content except we are clasped to His bosom and feel the Shepherd's arms around us. If our science is incompatible with this; if it stifles the voice of nature, and prevents us from knowing that God is our Father and that we are His children, and that all His anger even against our sins is still the anger of a Father who never ceases to love us; if its mechanical accuracy chills our feelings and blunts the keen edge of our desire to be like Him, to be with Him, to belong to Him,—then certainly is such science vanity, and worse than vanity; if it is truth to others, it is a deadly lie to ourselves. But the reverent study of the works of God assuredly need not ever lead in this direction. Rather in such study, as men behold the marvellous balance whereby our Father ever restores all things to their true rest, can they best learn, if they will, the quiet calmness, the trust in the Almighty's power and goodness, which best befits a Christian soul. The reverent study of His works can and will bring us nearer in temper to their Divine Author. For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things; to whom be glory for ever. Amen.